

# China, Byzantium, and the Shadow of the Steppe

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The season was late winter; the year, 630 CE: some two years after Heraclius's successful conclusion of the Persian Wars and just before the emergence of the Arabs as a serious threat to the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire. In China it was the beginning of the fifth year of the *Zhenguan* era of Li Shimin, the second emperor of the recently established Tang dynasty. More than three thousand miles to the east of Constantinople, at a place known to the Chinese as "Iron Mountain" (Tieshan), somewhere in the Yinshan range north of the great bend of the Yellow River and west of today's Hohhot, the intermittent, decade-long conflict between Tang China and the steppe empire of the Eastern Türks was approaching its climax. After getting the worst of several initial encounters with Chinese armies late in 629, the Türks' khagan Xieli had withdrawn to Iron Mountain and opened negotiations with the Tang court. Meanwhile, the senior Tang field commander, Li Jing, advanced to Baidao, several days' march south of Iron Mountain, and contemplated his next move.

The arrival of a high-ranking Tang ambassador at Xieli's camp inspired Li Jing and his colleague Li Shiji to plan an unauthorized surprise attack in the expectation that their opponents would have been lulled into a false sense of security by the ongoing peace talks. Starting from his camp at Baidao, Li Jing set out northward with a column of ten thousand horsemen carrying twenty days' rations for each soldier. At the same time, Li Shiji led a second column by another route

to a place called Qikou, "mouth of the desert," cutting off the Türks' most obvious escape route, one of the major tracks across the Gobi. The blow fell on 27 March 630. Benefiting from the cover of mist as well as the Türks' lax security, Li Jing's army stormed into the khagan's encampment. What followed was an utter rout. It seems that the Tang vanguard of two hundred mounted archers alone was sufficient to throw the unprepared Türks into panic; there was little left for the main body of attackers to do except loot and slaughter. Xieli was able to make his getaway on a fast horse, but tens of thousands of his followers surrendered when they found their escape blocked by Li Shiji's force. Chinese sources claim that ten thousand Türks were killed in the raid on Iron Mountain and more than one hundred thousand men and women fell into the hands of the victors. These figures may well be exaggerated, but the magnitude of the victory is beyond question. Xieli was soon handed over to Chinese troops by one of his own kinsmen, and the subjugation of the Eastern Türks provided the basis for nearly half a century of Tang hegemony over the pastoral peoples of the North Asian steppelands.<sup>1</sup>

1 For more accounts of the defeat of Xieli, with references to the Chinese sources on which they are based, see A. Eisenberg, "Warfare and Political Stability in Medieval North Asian Regimes," *T'oung Pao* 83 (1997): 320–25, and D. A. Graff, "Strategy and Contingency in the Tang Defeat of the Eastern Türks, 629–630," in *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500–1800)*, ed. N. Di Cosmo (Leiden, 2002), esp. 48–56.

Li Jing himself is supposed to have cited an earlier Chinese precedent for his strategy at Iron Mountain: In 204 BCE, during the civil wars that attended the establishment of the Han dynasty, the Han general Han Xin was preparing to attack the state of Qi when he learned that a Han envoy was already there negotiating a peace settlement. The general took advantage of this situation to launch an immediate offensive that resulted in the rapid conquest of Qi, though it cost the life of the envoy. This story is found in the *Shi ji* (Historical Records), written by the great Han historian Sima Qian around 100 BCE and well known to the educated elites of the Tang court.<sup>2</sup> Yet the play-book for the victory at Iron Mountain might just as well have been provided by a contemporary of Li Jing, writing in Greek rather than Chinese and living at the opposite end of the Asian landmass. The *Strategikon*, dating from around 600 CE and of unknown authorship (though conventionally attributed to the Eastern Roman emperor Maurice, who reigned from 582 to 602), offers the following observation:

Some commanders have welcomed embassies from the enemy and replied in gentle and flattering terms, sent them on their way with honors, and then immediately followed along and attacked them unexpectedly. Some have themselves sent embassies with favorable proposals and then launched an attack. Some have gone after the enemy in their camps by getting information about how securely they set up camp, and then on a moonlit night two or three hours before daybreak they would make their attack. Archers are essential for an operation of this sort.<sup>3</sup>

2 There is some disagreement in the sources as to which general first proposed the plan. Li Jing's biographies in the Tang dynastic histories give full credit to him; Liu Xu et al., *Jiu Tang shu* (945 CE; Beijing, 1975) [hereafter cited as *JTS*], 67:2479; Ouyang Xiu and Song Qi, *Xin Tang shu* (1060 CE; Beijing, 1975) [hereafter cited as *XTS*], 93:3814. The biographies of Li Shiji, however, identify their subject as the author of the strategy, but go on to say it was Li Jing who recognized the classical precedent and agreed to implement it (*JTS* 67:2485; *XTS* 93:3818). The account of Han Xin's conquest of Qi can be found in Sima Qian, *Shi ji* (ca. 86 BCE; Beijing, 1959), 92:2620.

3 Maurice's *Strategikon: Handbook of Byzantine Military Strategy*, trans. G. T. Dennis (Philadelphia, 1984) [hereafter cited as *Strategikon*], 93; see also 94–95.

Not all the details of Li Jing's operation accord with what we read in the *Strategikon*; his attack involved the opportunistic exploitation of his ruler's peace effort rather than a deceptive demarche of his own devising, and it hit the Türks' camp at an unspecified hour (although the presence of mist is certainly suggestive of late night or very early morning). Nevertheless, the basic outline—the exploitation of negotiations to achieve complete surprise in a raid on the enemy camp, and the key role of archers in the operation—is remarkably similar.

In only one important respect did Li Jing's plan diverge significantly from the *Strategikon*. The Byzantine text advises attacking an enemy camp from no more than three sides, leaving a clear line of retreat as surety that a defeated foe would not "be forced to close ranks and fight."<sup>4</sup> Our sources do not tell us from how many directions Li Jing's troopers attacked the khagan's camp at Iron Mountain, but his dispatch of Li Shiji's column to block the Türks' escape route at Qikou suggests that he had no intention of letting them get away. This move not only contravened the advice that Li Jing would have found in the *Strategikon*, had it been available to him, but also ran counter to the wisdom of *Sunzi bingfa* (Sunzi's Art of War, ca. 345–272 BCE) and other ancient Chinese military treatises that were well known to him, which cautioned against trapping one's opponents lest they be galvanized to fight with the desperation that might turn defeat into victory.<sup>5</sup>

Renowned for his mastery of the earlier Chinese literature on the art of war, Li Jing was also the author of a military text of his own. Although the *Li Jing bingfa* (Li Jing's Military Methods) survives in only fragmentary form today, the topics covered in those fragments—army organization, basic tactics, military law, the training of individual soldiers, group drills, military signals, formations for battle and march, arrangements for scouting and patrolling, the layout of the camp, the treatment of sick and wounded soldiers, the burial of the dead—are basically the same as those treated in the *Strategikon*.<sup>6</sup> A careful comparison of the

4 *Strategikon*, 96.

5 See Sunzi's chapter 7: *Sunzi jiaoshi*, ed. J. Wu et al. (Beijing, 1990), 126; English version in *The Art of War: Sunzi's Military Methods*, trans. V. H. Mair (New York, 2007), 104.

6 As will be explained in more detail later, what is left of Li Jing's book survives in the form of extracts quoted at length in chapters

two books reveals that the similarities between Chinese and Eastern Roman military methods of the seventh century CE run much broader and deeper than the single instance of Li Jing's raid on Iron Mountain would indicate; the latter is, so to speak, only the tip of the iceberg. Given the vast differences between the landforms, material resources, historical experiences, belief systems, and other cultural inheritances of these two early medieval empires, the similarities in their approaches to the conduct of war cry out for explanation.

This study will take a closer look at the common ground shared by Li Jing and the *Strategikon* and then move on to consider a range of possible explanations. These include (1) the diffusion of ideas, texts, and techniques across the length of Asia; (2) a similar technological base and common material constraints; (3) convergent institutional and ideational inheritances; and (4) shared military challenges and security problems that elicited broadly similar responses. It is this fourth point, in particular, that will be emphasized here. The need of both China and Byzantium to adapt and adjust in order to cope with the military challenge posed by the horse nomads of the Eurasian steppe—the dominant military paradigm for most of the first millennium CE—deserves pride of place when accounting for their similarities in wargaming.

In contrast to the *Strategikon*, Li Jing's book has not been passed down to us as an integral work. Lost during the Song period (960–1279), or possibly even before the end of the Tang dynasty in 907, the *Military Methods* survived in the form of substantial extracts quoted in the *Tong dian* (Comprehensive Canons), an encyclopedic work compiled by the prominent scholar-official Du You in the second half of the eighth century and presented to the throne in 801.<sup>7</sup> The earliest surviving copies of Du's work are not manuscripts, but woodblock editions printed during the Northern Song period (960–1127). The earlier transmission of the *Tong dian* is murky, but it was reportedly well received by scholars in the ninth century and presumably existed

in numerous manuscript copies; its presence is certainly well attested in early bibliographies and library catalogues.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to other works attributed to the same author, the authenticity of the Li Jing quotations incorporated in the *Tong dian* has never been seriously challenged. This is due in part to the authority of Du You, who was usually careful to identify his sources and began compiling the *Tong dian* only a century or so after the death of Li Jing, and in part to the close fit between the quotations and what is known of Li Jing's life.

Although Li began his career as a civil official and did not hold his first military command until the age of fifty, he was the nephew of a prominent general of the Sui dynasty and as a youth was already noted for his mastery of the ancient Chinese military classics such as *Sunzi bingfa*. Scoring his first military successes in the civil wars that brought the Tang dynasty to power, Li Jing gained fame in 621 when he led a fleet downstream from Sichuan to bring the middle and lower reaches of the Yangzi valley under Tang control. Later in life, he commanded the armies that defeated the Eastern Türks in 629–30 and another steppe people, the Tuyuhun inhabiting the region around Kokonor (today's Qinghai province), in 634–35. Li was renowned for embodying a combination of martial and literary abilities that enabled him to hold civil and military posts interchangeably, and there is anecdotal evidence that he was once assigned by the emperor to teach another officer what might today be called "military science."<sup>9</sup> The materials attributed to Li Jing in the *Tong dian* frequently quote the ancient military classics, and they assume a highly mobile nomadic foe such as the Türks or Tuyuhun; their character is also consistent with what Li Jing is supposed to have taught at the emperor's behest. The date of composition is uncertain, but it seems most likely that it was sometime between Li's defeat of the Eastern Türks, in 630, and his death, in 649.

148–59 of the *Tong dian*, an encyclopedic work dating from the late 8th century. It should not be confused with the *Questions and Replies of Tang Taizong and Li Duke of Wei* (*Tang Taizong Li Weigong wen-duit*), conventionally attributed to Li Jing and designated in the 11th century as one of the "Seven Military Classics" (*Wu jing qi shu*); the *Questions and Replies* is a forgery, albeit a brilliant one, dating from the Five Dynasties (907–960) or early Northern Song (960–1127).

7 Du You, *Tong dian* (Beijing, 1988) [hereafter cited as TD].

8 JTS 147:3983; Wang Pu, *Tang Huiyao* (961 CE; Beijing, 1990), 36:660; XTS 59:1563; Wang Yaochen et al., *Chongwen zongmu* (ca. 1040 CE; Taipei, 1965), 3:176; Chao Gongwu, *Junzhai dushu zhi* (ca. 1151 CE; Taipei, 1967), 14:18a.

9 For Li Jing's reputation, see Wu Jing, *Zhenguan zhengyao* (705 CE; Taipei, 1990), 2:60; also JTS 70:2529; XTS 98:3888–89; and Li Fang, *Taiping guangji* (978 CE; Harbin, 1995), 169:1284. For his instructional role, see Liu Su, *Sui Tang jia hua* (ca. 750 CE; Beijing, 1979), 1:7–8; also in XTS 94:3828 with slightly different wording.

When what is left of Li Jing's text is set side by side with the *Strategikon*, it is readily apparent that the Byzantines and the Tang Chinese arrived at very similar solutions to a number of problems. Both works call for an army marching through hostile territory to place its baggage train in the center with columns of infantry or cavalry moving on either side of it, and both call for outriders to be sent a considerable distance to secure the flanks of the marching column.<sup>10</sup> Both forbid the soldiers of a campaign army from hunting animals along the line of march, presumably because it distracted from the business at hand and was risky for both the hunters and the entire army.<sup>11</sup> Both seem to prefer camps that are square in shape, and both recommend that some troops be left behind to guard the camp when the army went into battle.<sup>12</sup> Both also speak of the deployment of tactical units of comparable size. For the Byzantine army this was the *tagma* (or *bandon*) of between two hundred and four hundred men; for the Chinese it was the *tong* of three hundred.<sup>13</sup> The two texts are in agreement even on some rather small details; both, for example, call for lance pennons to be furled before troops go into combat.<sup>14</sup>

With regard to deployment for battle, the author of the *Strategikon* holds that the army should form two lines, each at least several ranks deep, with the second line standing some distance behind the first. If the army includes both cavalry and infantry, the foot soldiers are

to be stationed in the center of the formation and the horsemen on the flanks.<sup>15</sup> Li Jing likewise indicates that most of the army's soldiers are to be deployed in two lines (assumed to be infantry), while the cavalry is positioned on the flanks of the second line.<sup>16</sup> In both texts, a clear distinction is made between those troops whose duty it is to go forward to engage the enemy and those who are to provide a secure baseline position on the battlefield. The *Strategikon* distinguishes between assault troops (*cursores*) and defenders (*defensores*): "Assault troops is the term used for those who move out ahead of the main line and rush upon the retreating enemy. Defenders are those who follow them, not charging out or breaking ranks, but marching in good order as a support for the assault troops if they should happen to fall back."<sup>17</sup> In Li Jing's manual, much the same division of labor is made between the combat units (*zhan dui*) in the first line and the support units (*zhu dui*) in the second line. The combat units include spearhead companies and companies of crossbowmen and archers, all considered to be infantry; the support units are companies of shock troops and maneuver troops, apparently mounted infantry who travel on horseback but fight on foot. When the troops in the first line move forward to pursue the enemy, those in the second line are not to leave their original position:

The cavalry, shock troops, and maneuver troops may not move on their own initiative. Should the infantry be pushed back by the enemy, the shock troops, maneuver troops, and cavalry go forward to meet the enemy with a spirited attack; the infantry must fall back and reform to assist the troops in front. Should the shock troops, maneuver troops, and cavalry then be repulsed by the enemy, the spearhead and other companies must advance to attack vigorously. If the enemy fall back, the maneuver troops and the cavalry may not exploit over a distance.

10 TD 157:4028–29; *Strategikon*, 60, 101, 156.

11 TD 149:3822–23; *Strategikon*, 22.

12 TD 157:4025; *Strategikon*, 58, 164. Here the *Strategikon* simply provides a diagram of the camp. Another military text, the so-called *Treatise on Strategy*, an anonymous work probably dating from the ninth century but surely incorporating much earlier material, offers an argument in favor of the square camp. See *Three Byzantine Military Treatises*, trans. G. T. Dennis (Washington, DC, 1985) [hereafter cited as *Three Treatises*], 89–91. For the dating of the *Treatise on Strategy*, see S. Cosentino, "The Syriac's Strategikon: A Ninth Century Source?" *Bizantinistica: Rivista di studi bizantini e slavi*, n.s. 2 (2000): 243–80.

13 TD 157:4025–26; *Strategikon*, 16–17, 35. Maurice recommends deliberately varying the size of the tagmas to prevent the enemy from estimating the overall size of the army. The most basic Tang tactical unit was actually the 50-man *dui*, but these could be combined on the battlefield to create larger formations of 150, 250, 450, and 500 men (TD 149:3813–14; 157:4033). J. Gu, however, has argued convincingly that the *tong* was the most important level of tactical organization in the early Tang; see his *Fubing zhidu kaoshi* (Taipei, 1985), 166.

14 *Strategikon*, 30; TD 149:3813.

15 *Strategikon*, 23–24, 144, 162. Also see the *Treatise on Strategy*, which recommends the placement of infantry in the center and cavalry on the flanks but does not mention the two-line deployment (*Three Treatises*, 107, 109).

16 TD 157:4033. Also see TD 149:3813, and the diagram in Z. Deng, *Li Jing bingfa jiben zhuyi* (Beijing, 1990), 106.

17 *Strategikon*, 15; also see p. 48, and the *Treatise on Strategy*, which speaks of the division into assault troops and defenders without using quite the same terms as Maurice (*Three Treatises*, 101, 109, 121).

Only after it has been learned through careful examination that the enemy are panicked and in disorder are they permitted to mount their horses to pursue and exploit. The support companies may not move on their own initiative.<sup>18</sup>

The maintenance of order, discipline, and cohesion in the midst of battle is of great concern for both the Chinese and the Byzantine general, and harsh coercive measures to that end are endorsed by both authors. Li Jing tells us that when a fifty-man company (*dui*) is deployed in combat formation, the deputy commander stands at the rear of the unit wielding a long-handled blade (*modao*) to cut down any man who fails to advance with the rest of the unit.<sup>19</sup> Soldiers in the ranks are to be rewarded for visiting summary discipline upon wavering comrades: "If the combat companies or the other companies have men who do not advance together with the others, the men of the same company who cut off their heads will be rewarded with fifty lengths of fabric. If men of other companies see those who do not advance and are able to cut off their heads, they will receive the same reward."<sup>20</sup> It seems that it was also frowned upon for men to disrupt the formation because of an excess of courage and aggressiveness, for Li Jing quotes with approval the famous story (from the ancient pre-Qin military classic, the *Wei Liaozi*) of the general Wu Qi's ordering the execution of a brave warrior who left his place in the ranks to take the heads of two enemy soldiers.<sup>21</sup> Dealing with the same subject, the *Strategikon* offers the following:

If during the time when the battle lines are being formed and during combat a soldier shall abandon his post or his standard and flee, or if he charges out ahead of the place where he has been stationed, or if he plunders the dead, or races off to pursue the enemy, or attacks the baggage train or camp of the enemy, we order

that he be executed, and that all the loot he may have taken be confiscated and given to the common fund of his tagma, inasmuch as he has broken ranks and betrayed his comrades.<sup>22</sup>

The need to prevent troops from plundering is repeatedly emphasized by the Byzantine author, who points to the opportunity such disorder may offer the enemy:

To plunder the dead or attack the baggage train or camp of the enemy before the battle is entirely over is very dangerous and can be disastrous. The soldiers should be warned well ahead of time, as is made clear in the military code, that they must absolutely avoid such acts. Often enough this sort of thing has caused troops who have already won a battle to be defeated and even annihilated. After they have scattered around, they have been wiped out by the enemy.<sup>23</sup>

Li Jing does not dwell on this problem at such great length but nevertheless makes it clear that "he who is the first to plunder after the enemy has been defeated will be decapitated."<sup>24</sup>

Both texts also discuss the arrangements to be made for the care of the sick and wounded and the burial of the dead. According to Li Jing,

In all cases when there are invalids in the encampments, in each encampment designate one officer to inspect the thick soups and porridges being fed to them and to lead them when the army is on the march. A comprehensive report on those men who have just fallen ill and those who have been lost to sickness is made to the commander every morning, and a medical man is ordered to make the rounds of the encampment with medicine to cure the sick. If the army sets out, it is the responsibility of the encampment master to provide officers to inspect the invalids. Those of the invalids who are judged to have the energy and strength to walk are provided with one man as an escort.

18 TD 157:4033–34. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Chinese are my own.) A difference between Tang and Byzantine practice is that while the Byzantine first line includes both assault troops and defenders, the Tang put all the support troops in the second line. See *Strategikon*, 76.

19 TD 157:4035.

20 TD 157:4036; TD 149:3819.

21 TD 149:3818–19.

22 *Strategikon*, 19–20.

23 *Strategikon*, 68; see also 86 and 121–22.

24 TD 149:3824.

If the case is serious and the man is not able to walk, one donkey is provided in addition. If he is not able to ride an animal, he is provided with two donkeys and two men as escorts and is brought along secured to a stretcher. If invalids are abandoned, if there are those who are not gathered in or those who are not fed, the officer responsible for inspecting the invalids and the men escorting the invalid are each to receive one hundred blows of the heavy stick. If there are those who are buried before they are dead, [the inspecting officer and the escorts] are executed.<sup>25</sup>

The connection between these arrangements and the morale of the troops, implicit in the Li Jing fragments, is made explicit in the *Strategikon*: “After the battle the general should give prompt attention to the wounded and see to burying the dead. Not only is this a religious duty, but it greatly helps the morale of the living.”<sup>26</sup>

Li Jing and his Byzantine counterpart both show great sensitivity to the psychology of troops in battle, and make very similar assumptions about human behavior. In situation X, soldiers will do Y; hence, we must do Z in order to create (or avoid) such a situation. Well aware of the observations in the ancient military classic *Sunzi bingfa* regarding the psychological dynamic unleashed by the presence of troops in “deadly ground” (*si di*), from which there is no escape route, Li Jing offers the following advice: “If the enemy is located in deadly ground, if he cannot rely on the security of his position, if his grain supply is already used up, we call him a ‘desperate bandit.’ The method for attacking such a one is to open his escape route, causing him not to have the determination to fight, and although numerous he may be defeated.”<sup>27</sup> The author of the *Strategikon* seems to make the same assumption that a cornered enemy will fight especially fiercely, and offers very similar advice: “When the enemy is surrounded, it is well to leave a gap in our lines to give them an

opportunity to flee, in case they judge that flight is better than remaining and taking their chances in battle.”<sup>28</sup>

It was also assumed that soldiers would throw themselves into heedless pursuit of a fleeing enemy unless efforts were made to restrain them. During their drills, Byzantine fighting men were instructed to keep to their assigned positions and avoid breaking up their formation by launching impetuous charges.<sup>29</sup> This concern for limited, controlled pursuit reflected a fear that disordered pursuers would be vulnerable to enemy counterattacks and ambushes.<sup>30</sup> The feigned flight was a tactic that seems to have been used very widely by both the Byzantines and their various opponents. According to the author of the *Strategikon*:

Instead of a large number of troops, some commanders draw up the smaller part of the army. When the charge is made and the lines clash, those soldiers quickly turn to flight; the enemy starts chasing them and becomes disordered. They ride past the place where the ambush is laid, and the units in ambush then charge out and strike the enemy in the rear. Those fleeing then turn around, and the enemy force is caught in the middle. The Scythian peoples [i.e., the nomads of the Eurasian steppes] do this all the time.<sup>31</sup>

The same concern for controlling pursuits, and the same fear of ambush and counterattack, is evident in the Li Jing fragments: “Once the enemy retreats in defeat, he may be pursued thirty paces. Investigation having determined that the enemy troops have indeed been defeated, the cavalry corps comes from behind to pursue the fugitives.”<sup>32</sup> The feigned flight was a tac-

25 TD 149:3819–20.

26 *Strategikon*, 70; see also 86.

27 TD 159:4087. See Sunzi’s chapter 7: *Sunzi jiaoshi*, 126; *Art of War*, 104 (both n. 5 above).

28 *Strategikon*, 91; also see p. 96. The same advice is offered by the *Treatise on Strategy (Three Treatises)*, 107, 119) and by the sixth century already had a very long pedigree in Greco-Roman military thought; see, for example, Vegetius, *Epitome of Military Science*, trans. N. P. Milner (Liverpool, 1993), 101; Polyænus, *Stratagems of War*, trans. R. Shepherd (Chicago, 1974), 52; and Frontinus, *The Stratagems and The Aqueducts of Rome*, trans. C. E. Bennett (London, 1980), 165–69.

29 *Strategikon*, 37.

30 *Strategikon*, 144; see also 48, 133, and 147, and *Three Treatises*, 121.

31 *Strategikon*, 52–53; see also 118, 119, 121–22, and 123, and *Three Treatises*, 119.

32 TD 149:3813; see also 154:3948 and 157:4033.

tic as well known to the Tang Chinese as it was to the Byzantines. Li Jing observes that when the enemy has concealed men in ambush, he “will purposely entice you with fleeing troops.”<sup>33</sup> He is not as clear as his Byzantine counterpart in recommending the feigned flight, speaking only in vague terms of the desirability of setting ambushes, but the dynastic histories of the Tang and the preceding Sui dynasty make it very clear that Chinese commanders used such ploys to lure opposing forces to destruction on many occasions during Li Jing’s lifetime.<sup>34</sup>

In both China and Byzantium, the cautious attitude evident in the fear of ambushes is also found in connection with the decision to give battle. It was well understood that a major battle in the open field involved enormous risks and was not to be entered into lightly. “With regard to arms,” Li Jing tells his readers, “it would be better to go for a thousand days without using them than have a single day when one is not victorious.”<sup>35</sup> Echoing Sunzi, he declares: “One is first victorious and only then does he give battle; one holds one’s own ground but does not lose an opportunity. This is called the path to certain victory.” And he goes on to devote considerable attention to those conditions under which the enemy may be successfully attacked and those under which it would be better to avoid challenging him in battle. The former include the enemy’s having covered a long distance without rest, marching in strong winds and bitter cold or under the heat of the blazing sun, or the enemy’s not yet having formed his troops for battle or successfully concentrated his forces.<sup>36</sup>

The author of the *Strategikon* is, if anything, even more cautious: “It is well to hurt the enemy by deceit, by raids, or by hunger,” he tells us, “and never be enticed into a pitched battle, which is a demonstration more of luck than of bravery.”<sup>37</sup> Another Byzantine military treatise, probably written two centuries after the

*Strategikon* but surely incorporating much earlier material, is not quite so emphatic in its rejection of battle but still urges caution: “If conditions are equal on both sides and the victory could go either way, we should not advance into battle before the enemy have become inferior to us in some respect.” The author then provides several examples of conditions under which the enemy has become inferior and may be engaged with less risk; some, such as the enemy’s having just completed an exhausting march, are nearly identical to conditions listed by Li Jing.<sup>38</sup>

Although the basic orientation and even many of the specific recommendations of Li Jing are essentially the same as those of his Byzantine counterparts, the resemblance is by no means total. There are significant differences as well. In contrast to Li Jing, who assumes that only a minority of the soldiers in a Tang Chinese field army, some twenty percent, will fight from horseback, the author of the *Strategikon* has written most of his recommendations for an army entirely made up of cavalry (with discussion of the employment of infantry being relegated to an appendix possibly borrowed from an earlier work by a different author).<sup>39</sup> Another difference is that Li Jing speaks of the deployment of a relatively small “spearhead element” (*zhanfeng dui*) in front of the first line of a much larger battle formation, with the task of being the first part of the army to attack (and ideally, to break) the enemy’s line of battle.<sup>40</sup> In the tenth century small contingents of very heavily armored Byzantine cavalry performed a quite similar function, but there is no equivalent in the military writings of the sixth and seventh centuries.<sup>41</sup>

Despite these differences, the overall impression that emerges from comparison of the Li Jing fragments with the *Strategikon* is one of similarity, and it is easy to lose track of whether a particular item of information was encountered in the Byzantine material or the Chinese. How, then, are we to explain the numerous

33 TD 150:3840.

34 TD 158:4061. For an example, see Wei Zheng et al., *Sui shu* (636 CE; Beijing, 1973), 71:1647.

35 TD 150:3840.

36 This is a main point of Sunzi’s chapter 4: *Sunzi Jiaoshi*, 53–64; *Art of War*, 88–90 (both n. 5 above). TD 150:3839; also see 150:3841, 154:3954–55, and 158:4061.

37 *Strategikon*, 83; see also 25, 65, 80, and 87–88. For an extended discussion of risk avoidance in Byzantine military thought, see W. E. Kaegi, Jr., *Some Thoughts on Byzantine Military Strategy* (Brookline, MA, 1983).

38 *Treatise on Strategy (Three Treatises)*, 103–5).

39 TD 148:3792–93; *Strategikon*, xvii–xviii, 12–14, 37–48. It is worth noting, however, that under ideal circumstances up to 50 percent of the soldiers of Li Jing’s expeditionary army are supposed to be mounted infantry, men who ride horses or donkeys to the battlefield and then dismount to fight on foot.

40 TD 157:4033–36; also see the diagram in Deng, *Li Jing bingfa jiben zhuyi*, 106.

41 For the tenth century, see E. McGeer, *Sowing the Dragon’s Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century* (Washington, DC, 1995).

similarities between the Chinese and Byzantine approaches to the “art of war”? One possible explanation, that a diffusion of ideas, if not of actual texts, occurred between the two empires, cannot be dismissed out of hand. There is ample evidence of the transmission of technology and other elements of the material culture of war during this period, especially from east to west, with the stirrup and the traction trebuchet as the most prominent examples. Yet both the *Strategikon* and Li Jing’s text seem deeply rooted in native soil; neither appears to mark a sharp break from existing local traditions of military thought. Li Jing quotes repeatedly from *Sunzi bingfa*, *Wei Liaozi*, and other military texts handed down from the pre-Qin period, while the Byzantine military writings, including the *Strategikon*, are part of a single tradition reaching back to Greek and Roman antiquity.<sup>42</sup> Rather than searching for influences and connections across the length of Asia, it seems more reasonable to concentrate on the implications of certain underlying similarities between Tang China and the Byzantine empire.

The basic similarity of material conditions and military technology in the two empires was undoubtedly a factor. In both Byzantium and China, armies moved on foot and on horseback with their supplies carried by some combination of wagons, beasts of burden, human porters, and wind- or oar-driven watercraft. The length of a day’s march was the same both east and west, as were the distances and speeds that messages and signals could travel (along with a variety of other logistical constraints). Wherever one was in early seventh-century Eurasia, the limits of the possible were essentially the same. Both empires relied upon a cavalry composed of both mounted archers and armored lancers as their main strike force, supported by infantry armed with spears, swords, javelins, and bows (plus slings, in the Byzantine case). The only major difference between the Tang and Byzantine armories was the Chinese use of the hand-held crossbow—a weapon that is attested in the late Roman world, but as a tool of hunters rather than infantrymen (as it was in China). The crossbow was not, however, the mainstay of Tang

armies, and was usually found in the hands of small contingents of specialist troops.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the common technological base shared by China and Byzantium, the military treatises indicate that the psychology of battle was essentially the same both east and west. The battlefield was governed by a few simple but powerful emotions: fear of wounds or death, greed for plunder, elation and even recklessness upon perceiving an apparent advantage. In these terms, soldiers in both China and Byzantium could be expected to have identical reactions to identical stimuli.

At both ends of Eurasia, this psychology had long been studied, recorded, analyzed, and consciously manipulated. The Chinese tradition of thinking and writing about the pragmatics of warfare dated at least from the early part of the Warring States period (fifth century BCE), while the Byzantines were heirs to a corpus of Greek military writing dating back to the fourth century BCE, which included the works of Aeneas the Tactician, Asclepiodotos, Onasander, and Polyaeus, among others.<sup>44</sup> In Byzantium, as in China, there was no sharp break with antiquity, and the accumulated experience and wisdom of the ancients was always available for consultation. Long before the beginning of the seventh century, the approach to warfare in both civilizations could be characterized as mature, sophisticated, and for the most part highly rational, an attitude clearly enunciated in the *Strategikon*.<sup>45</sup> For the soldiers of both empires, war was not just a trial of strength and courage, but rather an activity requiring the application of intellect, cunning, and trickery to gain every possible advantage. It was not an end in itself, an opportunity to demonstrate one’s manhood or justify one’s privileged position in society. It was seen as serious and dangerous business, not to be undertaken lightly, for it could easily lead to disaster. *Sunzi bingfa*, the most profound and influential of the early Chinese military treatises, opens with the observation, “Warfare is the greatest affair of

42 For examples of earlier works quoted by Li Jing, see *TD* 149:3819 and 158:4061. For the Greco-Roman-Byzantine tradition, see A. Dain, “Les stratégistes byzantins,” *TM* 2 (1967): 319; see also his “La tradition des stratégistes byzantins,” *Byzantion* 20 (1950): 315.

43 For the Byzantines and the crossbow, see J. Haldon, *Warfare, State and Society in the Byzantine World, 565–1204* (London, 1999), 133. For the use of the crossbow by Tang armies, see H. Yang, *Gudai bingqi shihua* (Shanghai, 1988), 150. I make no mention of the so-called “Greek fire” because it was primarily a naval weapon and my concern here is with warfare on land.

44 For a comprehensive listing of the Greek texts, see Dain, “Les stratégistes byzantins.”

45 *Strategikon*, 23.



state, the basis of life and death, the Way to survival or extinction.”<sup>46</sup> And the famous admonition of Laozi’s *Daodejing* (in existence by about 300 BCE) that “arms are instruments of ill omen” was borrowed and repeated by the authors of several other Chinese military texts, both ancient and medieval.<sup>47</sup> In Byzantium, meanwhile, we find one author expressing the opinion that “war is a great evil and the worst of all evils.”<sup>48</sup>

In fact, the Tang realm and the late Roman Empire had more in common than their approaches to warfare. Recently, Walter Scheidel and his collaborators have made the case for a “great convergence” of the Han dynasty in China and the Roman Empire. Although the two empires began from quite different starting points and were far from synchronous in their development—by the time that Rome had come to resemble Han China most closely, after the crises of the third century CE, the Han dynasty had already fallen—the two followed parallel trajectories of development over time to arrive at end points that were not much different: both saw

... shifts from city-states to territorial polities and from military mass mobilization for interstate warfare to professional armies for border control; the growth of a protobureaucratic civil service accompanied by functional differentiation of power; formal dichotomies in provincial organization eclipsed by centralization of government control; the settlement and military use of peripheral groups in frontier zones; massive expansion of the money supply through standardized state-controlled minting; state intervention in manufacturing and trade; census registration and formal status ranking of the general population; codification of law; the growth of markets in land and the gradual concentration of wealth among elites; the transformation of smallholders into tenants, coupled

with the growing strength of private patronage ties encroaching on state authority; unsuccessful attempts at land reform and eventual rural unrest; ideological unification through monumental construction, religious rituals, and elite education; the creation of a homogeneous elite culture and corpora of classics; the emergence of court-centered historiography; ideologies of normative empire sustained by transcendent powers; and, later on, religious change leading to the formation of autonomous church systems and a philosophical and religious shift in emphasis from community values to ethical conduct and individual salvation.<sup>49</sup>

The Byzantine state of the early seventh century was of course none other than the direct institutional continuation of the Roman Empire. While the Tang empire could boast no such seamless continuity, its institutions and identity were derived to a very great extent from the Han imperial legacy.

One element in this convergence that is of especially great significance in accounting for the common ground shared by the Li Jing fragments and the *Strategikon* is that both realms found defense against incursions of pastoral peoples from the neighboring steppes to be among the most serious and intractable of their military problems. Nomads fighting from horseback emerged as a threat to northern China during the fourth century BCE. The Xiongnu confederacy based in today’s Mongolia was the main external challenge faced by the Western Han dynasty for most of its existence (202 BCE to 9 CE), and Xiongnu elements continued to pose a problem during the early years of the Eastern Han (24–220 CE). During the fourth century CE northern China was overrun by peoples of steppe origin, many of whom had previously been settled within the empire to help defend its frontiers. The regimes they established were soon threatened by other pastoral powers based farther to the north, first the Rouran and then, from the mid-sixth century, the Turks. The Roman Empire, more distant from the steppe, felt its impact much later than China, with the arrival of the Huns (possibly related to the Xiongnu) via the Pontic steppe in the late fourth century CE,

46 Sunzi’s chapter 1: *Sunzi Jiaoshi*, 2. I have adopted Sawyer’s translation with minor modification; see *The Seven Military Classics of Ancient China*, trans. R. D. Sawyer (Boulder, CO, 1992), 157.

47 *Daodejing*, chap. 31. See *Tao Te Ching*, trans. D. C. Lau (Harmondsworth, 1985), 89; *Liu tao*, sec. 16 (*Bing dao*), in *Taigong Liu tao jin zhu jin yi*, trans. and ann. P. Xu, rev. ed. (Taipei, 1986), 96; Zhao Rui, *Chang duan jing* (ca. 716 CE), in *Zhongguo bingshu jicheng* (Beijing and Liaoning, 1988), 2:941.

48 *Three Treatises* (n. 12 above), 21.

49 W. Scheidel, ed., *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (New York, 2009), 4.

followed by the Avars (possibly related to the Rouran) and their Western Türk pursuers in the middle of the sixth century. Although the most threatening groups of Huns and Avars moved westward into territory (the Danubian basin) that limited their practice of pastoral nomadism, this did not bar them from continuing to employ effective military techniques developed much earlier on the open steppe. Chief among these methods were mounted archery and the deployment of highly mobile armies composed entirely of horsemen.

Both Rome (Byzantium) and China were profoundly influenced by this contact, whether it meant borrowing the military techniques of the nomads or developing new methods by which to resist them. This borrowing process was underway in China as early as the end of the fourth century BCE, a hundred years before the Qin-Han unification, when King Wuling of the northern frontier state of Zhao adopted both the costume and the cavalry tactics of the nomads. By Tang times, the military techniques of the steppe dwellers were quite familiar to the Chinese. It is worth noting, in this connection, that the founders of the Tang dynasty themselves were of mixed Chinese and Turkic origin, and as frontier commanders under the preceding Sui dynasty, they had firsthand experience of campaigning against the Eastern Türks and made sure that at least some elements of their army were trained to fight in the same manner as the Türks.<sup>50</sup> Among the Romans, the influence of the steppe was felt, directly or indirectly, from the second century CE onward as the proportion of cavalry in the eastern armies increased and new units of mounted archers were created. By the sixth century CE the Eastern Roman armies included many contingents of Huns and other steppe peoples. The arrival of the Avars in the middle of the sixth century touched off another wave of borrowing that is evident in the *Strategikon*, which begins with the training of a mounted archer and goes on to recommend the use of Avar-type cavalry lances, horse armor, tunics, and tents. The stirrup, mentioned in this context though not explicitly linked to the Avars, was probably also a very recent import from the steppe world.<sup>51</sup> Other sections of the *Strategikon* devote considerable attention to tactical methods of the “Scythians” and other steppe peoples, especially their use of the feigned flight and

various sorts of surprises and ambushes; these are presented not simply as pitfalls to be avoided, but as models for emulation (see above, 162–63).

An early study of the impact of the nomads’ way of war on the armies of Rome and Byzantium was published by Eugène Darkó in 1935. The essence of steppe strategy, as described by Darkó, corresponds very closely to the Chinese and Byzantine approaches to battle outlined above:

[It] was based not on brute strength, but on an ingeniously conceived plan. The fundamental principle was to cause the greatest possible loss to the enemy, all while sparing one’s own forces. It was for this reason that they would always seek to initiate battle under conditions unfavorable to the enemy, and to attack him on his weakest side. They would not engage in a decisive battle except when, in the first engagements preparing the decisive action, they had already assured themselves of the conditions and advantages necessary to carry off the victory.<sup>52</sup>

That the Chinese and Byzantines were also behaving in this way cannot be blamed entirely on the nomads. In the Chinese case, we find much the same cautious approach advocated in *Sunzi bingfa*, a text predating the introduction of cavalry.<sup>53</sup> Certain tricks had been known for a long time already. The *Zuo zhuan*, a collection of accounts of events during the Spring and Autumn Period (722–481 BCE), has a story about one Cao Gui, a man of Lu who offered military advice to his duke during a battle against the neighboring state of Qi in 683 BCE. Cao recommended that Lu troops set out in pursuit only after he had inspected the tracks left by the Qi chariots to determine that their flight was not a ploy intended to lure the Lu army into an ambush.<sup>54</sup> Given the many limitations on the maneuverability of chariots, however, including their inability to operate in most types of terrain, it seems unlikely that tricks,

50 Graff, “Strategy and Contingency” (n. 1 above), 61–64.

51 *Strategikon*, 11–13.

52 E. Darkó, “Influences touraniennes sur l’évolution de l’art militaire des Grecs, des Romains et des Byzantins,” *Byzantion* 10 (1935): 450. My translation.

53 Sunzi’s chapter 7: *Sunzi jiaoshi*, 123–25; *Art of War*, 103 (both n. 5 above).

54 Duke Zhuang, 10th year. See J. Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics*, vol. 5, *The Ch’un T’sew with the Tso Chuen* (Taipei, 1985), 85–86.

traps, and surprises based on rapid maneuver were nearly as prevalent in early China as they became after mounted troops became a standard component of most armies. Due to the far superior tactical and operational mobility of warriors mounted on horseback, and of armies composed largely or wholly of cavalry, certain ploys that had not been unknown in earlier days became much easier (and safer) to execute and, as a result, came to shape military practice in northern China during the early medieval period.

Li Jing's maneuver to cut the Türks' escape route from Tieshan, so contrary to the recommendations of both Sunzi and the *Strategikon*, may also reflect the influence of steppe cavalry on Chinese military practice. According to Thomas Barfield, "Nomadic tradition demanded that a defeated enemy always be run to ground, while traditional Chinese strategy cautioned against pushing a defeated army too far, lest in desperation it inflict a defeat on its pursuers."<sup>55</sup> Where it was possible for an enemy to retreat over vast distances in order to recoup his strength and then return to fight again another day, it made sense that he should not be allowed to get away. By the fourteenth century, indeed, it had become a standard practice of the Ming dynasty's armies to trap their Mongol opponents against rivers or lakes so they could be slaughtered.<sup>56</sup> That Li Jing was already acting in this way while his Byzantine counterpart was still recommending the opposite may perhaps be attributed to the fact that the Chinese had a longer and more intimate acquaintance with nomadic warfare and were more likely to be fighting in close proximity to the open steppe.

In general, however, it would not be quite right to present the techniques found in either the *Strategikon* or the Li Jing fragments as a simple case of the adoption of the military practices of the steppe nomads. As a sedentary power based on populations that were primarily agricultural (an "agrarianate empire," to borrow from Marshall Hodgson's lexicon), neither Tang China nor Byzantium was in a position to rely entirely upon mounted forces comparable to those of the nomads. In our two texts, we see not just a symmetric response—the borrowing of techniques from

the steppe—but also what might be characterized as a package of asymmetric responses designed to minimize the risks that a slower-moving sedentary army faced when campaigning against a wily and highly mobile steppe adversary. Although Li Jing does not mention specific opponents as the author of the *Strategikon* does, his repeated attention to locating grass and water, his concern with pasturing horses and preventing their loss to sudden night raids, and his advice for forming wide marching columns with scouts deployed miles away on either side all suggest that his expeditionary army is assumed to be operating on the open steppe against a nomadic foe such as the Türks or Tuyuhun. The Tang general is nearly obsessive in his attention to the sentries, scouts, and other precautions needed to protect both the encampment and the army on the march from surprise attack. When the army stays in one place for more than a few days, observation posts are to be established at a distance of thirty to sixty miles from the main encampment and linked to it by a chain of fire beacons (at 6.6-mile intervals).<sup>57</sup> The deployment of the army on the battlefield into multiple echelons, with strict limitations on which troops are allowed to pursue the enemy (and how far, and under what circumstances), and the stern prohibitions against breaking ranks to plunder may also be understood as protective responses to an opponent not only prone to feigned flights and ambushes, but also capable of rallying quickly and returning to the attack after an initial reverse. Although not all of the details are the same (the *Strategikon*, for example, does not call for a chain of beacons), the Chinese and Byzantine military writers, faced with the same basic set of problems, offer a strikingly similar range of responses.

This cursory comparison of the Li Jing fragments with the *Strategikon* has some wider implications as well. The many pronounced similarities between the recommendations of the two texts call into question—for the seventh century, at least—the existence of distinct eastern and western ways of war as has been asserted by Victor Davis Hanson and various others, and it also casts serious doubt on the presumed superiority of a "Western Way of War" characterized by face-to-face confrontations of heavy infantry scorning trickery and evasion and seeking a decisive outcome

55 T. J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China* (Oxford, 1990), 151–52.

56 A. Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge, 1990), 104–5.

57 TD 157:4029.

by the most direct means possible.<sup>58</sup> What emerges from the evidence considered here is the existence of an ecumenical “Eurasian” way of war, with convergence driven above all by the pressing need of both China and Byzantium to respond to the challenge posed by the steppe warriors who represented the dominant military paradigm of the sixth and seventh centuries of the Common Era.

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58 Prominent examples of the now voluminous literature asserting the existence of a “Western Way of War” include V. D. Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece* (New York, 1989) and *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York, 2001); J. Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York, 1993); and G. Parker, ed., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare: The Triumph of the West* (New York, 1995).